

Layton to leave city hall after 12 years; Veteran councillor latest incumbent to not seek re-election

The Toronto Star

July 27, 2022 Wednesday

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Section: NEWS; Pg. A1-A10

Length: 945 words

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Body

After 12 years of pushing city hall to build bike lanes and fight climate change, Mike Layton is ready to move on.

In a surprise announcement, the Ward 11 University-Rosedale city councillor, one of the most recognized faces in local politics, told the Star he will not seek re-election Oct. 24 and has no firm plans for his next job.

Layton becomes the seventh incumbent heading for the exit, setting up the biggest Toronto council shakeup since 2010, when he made his council debut, and possibly the biggest shakeup since Toronto amalgamated in 1998.

"Serving is a huge honour," Layton said. "I've done it for 12 years and I've tried to make sure I've used every moment of my time - and every ounce of the power I've had - to make a difference in people's lives. It's time for me to move on and try something new.

"This is something I've been considering for the last couple of months, both in terms of where can I have the most impact, and also my family. I've missed far too many bedtimes, far too many dinners.

"As we transition back to an in-person (work) model, I need to think also about the impact of this type of public service on my family. I have two little kids I adore, I have a partner who has been incredibly supportive these past 12 years, and I think it's time to give back a little bit, to them."

He wants to continue fighting climate change and inequality in a role outside elected office that will give him back evenings and weekends at home. To that end, he has no plans to seek the Ontario NDP leadership.

Layton's departure leaves open races in Toronto's three development-intensive downtown wards. His best friend Joe Cressy quit Ward 10 Spadina-Fort York for a senior post at George Brown College. Kristyn Wong-Tam resigned from Ward 13 Toronto Centre to launch a successful bid to become a New Democrat MPP.

Layton, who does not know if he'll endorse a candidate to succeed him, said he's not concerned about the right-leaning council losing three high-profile voices for progressive causes.

"There are already some great downtown candidates and I have no doubt there will be good, strong, progressive voices in Ward 11," Layton said.

As for the possibility of John Tory using endorsements and robocalls to try to get like-minded politicians elected downtown, as he did in other parts of the city in 2018, Layton said: "Who the mayor endorses shouldn't be the deciding factor - it's important to have a wide diversity of perspectives at council."

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The son of former federal NDP leader Jack Layton led the political fight to get Toronto ambitious climate action goals, writing Tory's 2019 declaration of a climate emergency, helping launch TransformTO and spurring council to accelerate the city's goal of carbon neutrality to 2040 from 2050.

His bike lane advocacy has seen the once-controversial infrastructure added to roads such as Bloor Street and University Avenue. He successfully lobbied the Ontario government to allow contraflow lanes, where cyclists can go both direction on roads that are one-way for vehicles.

Frances Sanderson, who served on the Aboriginal affairs committee with Layton, credits him with helping navigate the city bureaucracy and council on initiatives including city hall's Indigenous Affairs office and a residential school survivors' monument coming to Nathan Phillips Square.

Asked for low points in office, Layton cites his father's 2011 death from cancer but says he was moved by the outpouring of love from Torontonians who covered the square with chalk tributes to his dad.

"It was a very public expression of grief but also an enormously public demonstration of gratitude for his life and love for him, which I'm so very thankful for," he said.

Other councillors not seeking re-election are, so far, Ana Bailão (Davenport), John Filion (Willowdale), Michael Ford (Etobicoke North) and Denzil Minnan-Wong (Don Valley East). Candidates can register until Aug. 19.

More than one-quarter of the 25 council races this fall will have no incumbent. On a percentage basis, that's more open races than in the last big turnover year, 2010, when nine out of 44 races had no incumbents. But 2010 could remain a bigger change year because five incumbents lost in that election, resulting in about one-third of councillors being fresh faces.

Coun. Gord Perks, longtime unofficial leader of council's left flank, bemoaned Layton's loss and said Premier Doug Ford's 2018 reduction in council seats, making each of them much bigger, is taking a toll.

"Mike has been a real force for decency and kindness in civic affairs and he's brought a lot of very good work, especially on preparing for climate change and I know he'll continue that outside of city hall," said Perks, who is fighting for re-election in Parkdale-High Park.

"The big concern is these downtown wards, with huge daytime populations and intense development, have become almost unmanageable," Perks said.

"The sheer pressure of three councillors having stewardship over the downtown core, which in daytime has probably close to three-quarters of a million people - it's just too much."

Layton said he was still working lots of nights before his patch swelled to more than 100,000 residents. But having a supersized ward, with a raft of new neighbourhoods vying for his attention, made the job less satisfying.

"You have less time to engage the community at a community level, and less time to work with colleagues to build citywide campaigns around issues."

Layton urges anyone elected this fall to work with councillors of other political stripes, as he did with right-leaning Tory, to "get more in the spirit of collective action, city goals and the purpose of us as government."

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Layton to leave city hall after 12 years; Veteran councillor latest incumbent to not seek re-election

Journal Code: TTA

Subject: CAMPAIGNS & ELECTIONS (90%); CITY GOVERNMENT (90%); ELECTIONS (90%); CITIES (89%); ELECTIONS & POLITICS (89%); POLITICS (89%); MAYORS (78%); RESIGNATIONS (77%)

Geographic: TORONTO, ON, CANADA (94%); ONTARIO, CANADA (91%); CANADA (79%)

Load-Date: July 27, 2022

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